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Magdalena Kožená

Václav Talich

Michal Rataj



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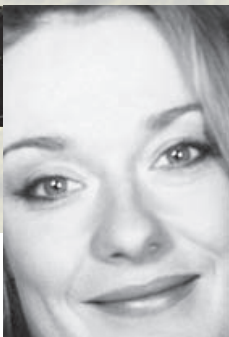
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editorial

The title page of this issue belongs to the singer Magdalena Kožená, who is one of the most internationally successful Czech artists today. Conductor Václav Talich was an important figure for Czech music and his legacy should not be forgotten. We bring you an article summing his life and work and another text about his recordings, which preserve his mastery for us and for next generation. When talking about generation, we should not forget to introduce some younger artist. This time it is young composer Michal Rataj, who is active in the field of electronic (but not only) music and also brings new music to the listeners of Czech Radio.

From the next issue, Czech Music will be slightly different. Instead of six thin magazines, you will get four thicker, so the amount of pages will be unchanged. This will allow us to bring you longer and more in-depth texts and essays on different topics. You will also find a new attachment called Profiles. Here we will introduce you some composers, who were important for development of Czech musical culture, but who are less known in the world. This year we will start with those, whose round anniversary falls on this year, which was proclaimed "The Year of Czech Music".

Matěj Kratochvíl
MATĚJ KRATOCHVÍL
EDITOR

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CD Review

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magdalena,

I doubt that I need to introduce MAGDALENA KOŽENÁ to anyone. She is the most successful Czech musician in the world and records at least two CDs annually for a top company, something her competitors must certainly envy here in the current crisis of the recording industry. In the late summer she brought out a French album, she triumphed at the Prague Castle at the Strings of Autumn Festival, in November she made her debut at the New York Met, in January she will be singing in the Carnegie Hall, next year there will be two new recording projects and on the 2nd of June she should be having a recital at the Prague Spring. Shortly before her departure from the Czech Republic she gave us an interview.



At your September concert in Prague Castle the French ambassador presented you with a high state honour of the French Republic. How does it feel to be a Chevalier de l'Art?

I can't quite get used to it, and I was very much surprised, because these sorts of medals are given for lifelong achievements. Well, perhaps not always, since I was told that I was the youngest knight. Since one can't speak of lifelong achievements in my case, for me it mainly means an obligation to do even more in the future. Perhaps they partly gave it in the hope that I will carry on in the right direction.

You have a close relationship with France not only because your husband is French but also because of your affinity for French culture. What part did that play when you decided on the form of your last project, which is completely French from repertoire to conductor?

It was a combination of several things. In the past I have done a lot of French music, mainly songs, and have tried to penetrate the mysteries of the French language. For several years now I have been working with Marc Minkowski and I have many friends in France. I and the people from Deutsche Grammophon agreed that since the previous disc had been as it were a "Prague" collection, then this one could be French; it is music that suits me and I wanted to devote even more time to French music than before.

Was it clear from the beginning that you would work with Marc Minkowski?

Well, as you know, they (Note: the management of Deutsche Grammophon) try to ensure that one recording of mine with orchestra comes out every year. It's more expensive, but it sells better than smaller scale work. And so when it was clear what kind of album this one was going to be, Marc Minkowski was the only possible conductor.

You've already worked on several wonderful projects with Minkowski, and he must be a good friend of yours, but he is a conductor, after all, and conductors like to dominate...

I was a little worried about that, because like every conductor he has his own ego and accompanying a singer on a recording isn't something pleasant for a conductor, because he simply has to keep in the background. Then the best that people say about it is that the conductor has supported the soloist well, and that's usually all. At that point every good conductor has the feeling that life is short and he ought to be doing something else. At the beginning it really was like that. And there's yet another problem with Minkowski, which is that he hates recording in a studio and does his best to avoid it. He does live recordings. Naturally there are then some corrections, although there were none with Giulius Cesar, but otherwise the recording is taken from one of two performances and the

you're a devil!

final rehearsal. In this case he had to admit that you can't record 14 opera arias live. He had to accept that there wouldn't be an audience and it was a situation that frightened him.

What was it like working with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra?

It's an excellent orchestra. Basically all the members are about the same age as me, they have huge enthusiasm and they really enjoy the music. Just like conductors, orchestras don't like doing records in which they are just accompanying singers, because they don't get to really play to the full, they feel pushed into the background and the whole advertising campaign is based on the singer. But in the end it went very well and even Minkowski, who as I've said doesn't like doing this sort of thing, gritted his teeth at first and did it because he liked me. It went well – it had to, since companies today can't afford to make a CD with an orchestra every week.

Did you make the choice? What couldn't you find space for?

I was keen on plenty of Gounods, some Offenbachs, *Le roi d'Ys* by Edouard Lalo... It was mainly me who actually made the choice, Minkowski made various suggestions, and sometimes there was a compromise. In the end I was pleased that he pushed me to the Eboli, for example, which was the one I resisted the hardest. He convinced me that in the French version it is a sort of popular Spanish song, and the coloraturas in it need a lighter voice. I gave in – at the end of the day it may be the first and last Verdi in my life... And so I had quite a ball with it. Another of his ideas was *Carmen*. He convinced me that the first Carmen was actually a soprano, that it was written for the Opera Comique and not for the Opera Bastille and that today's idea of a Carmen with a deepthroated, darker voice is completely different from what Bizet had in mind. And so I thought, why not? Why not do it differently?

Will you sing the whole role of Carmen some time?

Singing Carmen is every mezzosoprano's dream, since the role is worth it, and I don't think I shall be any different. If the conductor was someone who would work with my conception of the role and not push me into a traditional Carmen, and if it was with a good orchestra and in more chamber-style conditions, then I proba-

bly wouldn't say no. But in view of my itinerary it still couldn't happen for another four or five years.

The choice of music on the CD is very diverse. Are they numbers that you have really fallen in love with?

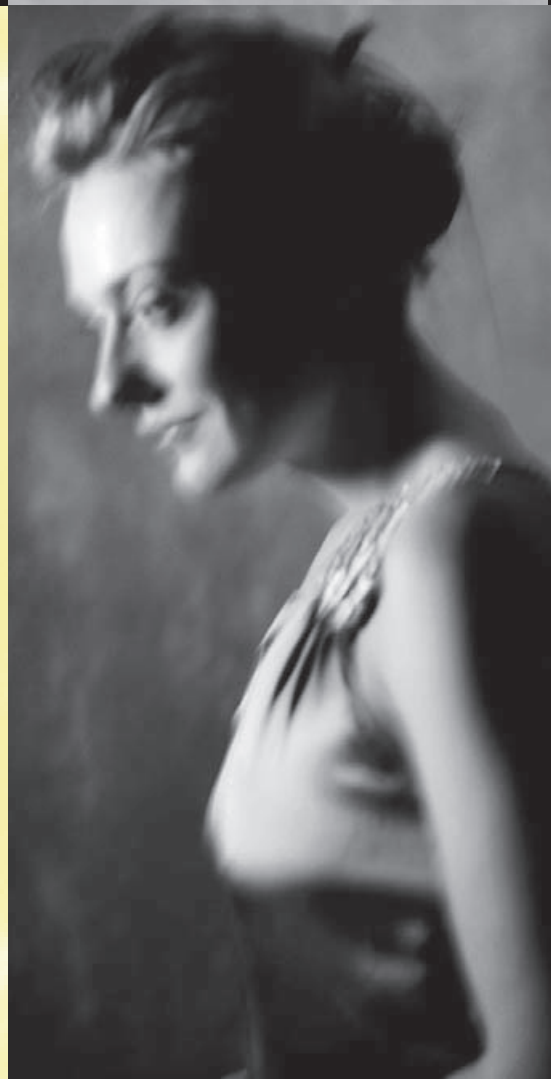
There are some things I would really like to sing on the stage. One of them is Massenet's *Cinderella*, which is rarely staged and the whole opera is beautiful. I'm also terribly fond of the arias of *Cleopatra*. From the stage point of view I'm very tempted by Ravel's *The Spanish Hour*. He is one of my favourite composers, and the acting style of the work and recitative mode of singing, which I enjoy, are close to my heart.

At Easter this year you will be working for the first time with Cecilia Bartoli in Salzburg. Although you are very different as types, you are often seen as competitors in the field of Baroque and Classical music. Are you worried that there might be tension?

I'm very much looking forward to it. I've only ever talked to Cecilia once, in London. She is very pleasant and natural and it's the managers buzzing around her who turn her into an awesome wonder. I didn't get the feeling that she would feel threatened by me, or that we would somehow necessarily have to compete. What is more, *Così fan tutte* has no leading soloist. All six characters are equal, and the point isn't to be star of the evening. I hope this performance will be based on our all enjoying the meeting and having fun together. I expect it will be like with Simon Rattle, who just enjoys music and whose guiding principle is the incredible power that he draws from music, with every other consideration taking a back seat. When he's around there is no place for star scenes. When I was with him in the summer in Glyndebourne, the atmosphere there was incredibly ordinary and sincere, and there was none of the tension you often find at festivals or opera productions. So what I expect from Salzburg is mainly pleasure in music-making and I'm curious how it will work out because our voices really are very different. I'm curious what will arise from the combination of different kinds of energy.

You have just mentioned the summer with Simon Rattle. After Gardiner and Harnoncourt he is another of the conducting giants of today. What plans does he have with you?

We gave concert performances of the



Idomeneo that we did in Glyndebourne in Lucerne and Berlin and we shall be repeating it again in the Spring in Salzburg. We also plan to do *Sheherazade* in Berlin, to do a tour with his ensemble of period instruments the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and put on Rameau's opera *Hippolite et Aricie*. To be frank, I don't know a better conductor today.

You've also worked with Nikolaus Harnoncourt. How do you see the two conductors?

It's hard to compare Harnoncourt and Rattle. They are geniuses, who have a rather different way of expressing themselves and different temperaments. Harnoncourt is more musicological, he has very definite views and not everyone agrees with him. I too have felt that I would like to do something differently, but the force of his personality and his own conviction persuades you. Perhaps in later productions people go back to their own

ideas, but at the time when he persuades me, I know why I'm doing it his way. It's a strange magical feeling. If I have someone I trust and admire beside me, then I'm willing to change things that I feel differently about. This is because I think music can be done in many ways and there is not just one correct path. And so I have no problems trying something a different way. Quite the reverse in fact. I enjoy trying something out. My work with Harnoncourt was enriching, for example I learned a lot on the theoretical side. What most catches your attention are his eyes, he actually conducts with his eyes – he looks and the person knows what he must do. Simon Rattle is very impulsive and for him music comes more from emotion than the rational study of books. He has immeasurably positive energy and he puts a great deal of trust in the people he has chosen, leaving them a lot of freedom too. It's all a matter of real co-operation, not the usual model – I'm the conductor, I have the idea and everyone else is supposed to fulfil it. In the end he gets what he wants as well, but in a completely unforced way. Both conductors are rare people, in artistic and human terms. Unlike some of their colleagues they don't use conducting as an instrument of power.

Why does Rattle conduct an orchestra playing on copies of period instruments as well as normal symphony orchestras?

There's no contradiction. On the contrary, when he is conducting his period instrument orchestra, he very frequently talks about jazz, which he loves. I agree with him that Baroque music approaches jazz in its greater freedom, improvisation. For example in the phrasing he says he wants us to do some *appoggiaturas* like Billy Holiday, which means before the relevant bar. Historians might say it was almost in bad taste, but with him it isn't disruptive of the drive of the music. You ought to fit into the bar, as it were, and the tempo shouldn't change, but within individual bars a performer can move and speak with the music according to his or her emotions. There was a huge freedom not only in the recitatives but also in the arias we have done together. He often said to me: "At these points we have to meet up, but otherwise you can do what you like." That is a wonderful thing and one I have encountered only very rarely. With Simon Rattle I'm not bound by any strict rules, and that suits me.

This year the French album will be followed by a song recital. Will it be non-traditional again, like the Martinů with the Dvořák?

It will be a great mixture of languages and instrumental settings. From Shostakovich's *Russian Satires*, which have been sung only once – by Vishnyevska, for whom they were written, to Britten's *English Lullabies*, the *German Songs* for Violin, Voice and Piano by Erwin Schulhoff [it will be the first Schulhoff in the DG catalogue – note LS], the *Il tramonto* from the Italian Respighi for string quartet and mezzosoprano to the French *Songs of Madagascar* by Ravel for cello, flute, voice and piano. I'm pleased that the cellist will be Jiří Barta.

How did you manage to get the Deutsche Grammophon managers to take him on?

I just said that he was going to play on the record. I lent them his Dvořák album and then there was nothing to discuss. Jiří Barta has a superb tone and expression and anyone with even a little understanding of the music can see it at once.

Generally it must take a lot of obstinacy to get agreement for a record with such a selection of songs...

I'm not the type to make scenes to get what I want. I've been talking about the Shostakovich and Britten for several years now, but it's only now that it's come off. The simple fact is that when you record a CD with an orchestra that sells well, occasionally you can afford a rather non-commercial project. Nobody expects this record to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Sometimes you are forced to make compromises.

And so this was a kind of reward?

Yes, I've earned my reward. I couldn't say that I'd actually been suffering before, but this CD will be a sort of cherry on the cake. It's music that I love.

Perhaps it means that your position with Deutsche Grammophon is now so strong that you can record what you like.

That's more or less true. We have thought up several projects and now we're trying to choose the commercial project that will be a payment for the cherries in my plan. I should touch wood, but at the moment I'm lucky in being almost the most recorded female singer. Because I also sing earlier music and the company has its Archiv series, then instead of one CD there are at least two every year, which is exceptional these days. Of course it means a lot of work, not just musical, but also company promotion including "promodays" when I spend the whole day giving interviews for example.

Apart from the French album, this year saw the release of the remarkable recording of Handel's opera *Cleopatra*. Is it really live?

I am very proud of it. We only used two concerts for the recording (there's not usually money for recording operas today) and between them we only re-recorded the beginnings and ends, to get rid of the applause. And even though we recorded both operas, there are no cuts inside the numbers and we just chose the best version of each number. What's more, it was an experiment for me, because it was my first. The beginning was at eight, and the toughest aria came at around midnight. After six performances and four hours I really had to concentrate to the utmost to make sure that the recording should be the best possible. It was a kind of Olympic games with two chances. Otherwise I had a fabulous time, because the role of *Cleopatra* has so many different levels, from soubrette flirt through transformation into a woman in love to vocal gymnastics. I recorded the French album just a week after the *Cleopatra* tour, and I wondered whether I would manage it because it was on the limits of human possibilities. After that I was sick for three weeks. I wouldn't want to do such crazy things too often.

You have taken on the patronage of Czech Dreams 2004? What do you hope for from the event?

I very much hope it will work out as the organisers want. I welcome every attempt to promote Czech music and I am pleased that Czech centres abroad have become involved. Meeting people outside the country I always discover a great admiration for Czech music. Those people are open to deeper knowledge of our music, and what Czech Dreams should offer is precisely some lesser known composers alongside the great classics. I get the feeling that the general trend, in the recording industry for example, is for people to buy interesting, lesser known music and not always the same old Beethoven symphonies and Mozart arias. A few years ago when I recorded the album Mozart – Gluck – Mysliveček, everyone asked about Mysliveček and Mozart didn't interest them much. People are avid for new things, and so they expect new things from Czech Dreams as well as other events. Of course, for someone abroad the New World Symphony could be a discovery, but we should be thankful for every soul gained for classical music.

How has Magdalena Kožená changed since the period of the legendary Bach recordings?



I've certainly changed. I wouldn't say that I was an absolute rebel, but I was never an industrious student, and more a sort of original. I was always interested in what I sensed in the music, and I didn't let anyone else get much of a word in. I don't know if I can express it precisely, but today I've matured to the view that music is what you want to say with it. I am fundamentally less restricted by views around me on how it ought to sound. You must live your own life somehow and then you must somehow project it into your role on the stage, and you must transmit something to people, or at least try. That is my mission. People should leave a concert with some new feeling or idea. In Baroque music I've freed myself more from views on how it ought to be authentic. I may sound cruel, but in fact that no longer interests me much. The priority for me is feeling, emotion, what it is that music gives human beings.

In the context of Ravel you talk about how it is like singing pictures. Is that something that could be generalised as your musical philosophy?

In a way, yes. Of course sometimes it is the text that is more central, and at other times the expression of colours, moods, pictures. At all events, for me it isn't a question of creating beautiful notes. Unfortunately many singers cannot get free of the idea and for them the most important thing is to have a well settled voice, to sing technically correctly and to make beautiful notes. But that is just the foundation. The singer must then know how to produce ugly notes as well, he must know why, and what for, and must learn the art of exploiting them. Art isn't just beautiful images, and life isn't just beautiful. When you listen to Anja Silja, it isn't beautiful, but something meaningful is happening there. There must always be a meaning, otherwise it wouldn't be interesting for me, even if it were beautiful.

Recently I read that your voice was once translucent and now it is opulent. What is your voice like?

I have never had a feeling of translucency. Naturally people mature, usually for the better, which is a good thing. What frightens me is that one day I might reach a point when it would start going down hill. At the beginning I was bothered by self-doubt, but today I'm somewhere else and tackling other things. Voices simply change, and in another ten years for example I may not be able to sing coloratura and Baroque repertoire. My voice will be heavier and "more opulent", but why not? One of the beautiful aspects of singing is precisely the way the voice develops, and



sings other repertoire. I'm not afraid of that, since I like change.

Over seven years you have become an international star. Some enthusiastic fans take it as far as falling in platonic love with you. Do you have any defence against fame, and is it changing your view of the world and values in life?

I've had to learn to keep a certain distance. Naturally I get into situations where the loss of privacy is unpleasant. Fortunately in classical music the problem isn't as serious as in pop. I can't imagine the kind of life Madonna must lead, for example, or a famous footballer. For me it would be unbearable. But when I go out into the streets of London, maybe a couple of people who go to concerts recognise me, but otherwise I do as I like. I feel best, of course, when I'm with old friends and we talk about cooking, about my friends' children and completely ordinary things.

I gather your grandfather, who is 87, came to your September concert in Prague Castle...

It was magic. My grandmother, who died in March, had heart problems and identified tremendously with my career. She had once wanted to be an actress, but hadn't managed it, and so she saw herself in it all, a little. But throughout my career she couldn't come to my concerts, because the emotion might have been too much for her heart. And granddad stayed at home to show solidarity with her. That's why it was only now that he first came to a concert of mine, and for me it was a terribly important and marvellous moment. He was terrifically moved and after the concert he said, "Magdalena, you're a devil," which made me laugh.

Used by permission of Harmonie magazine.



A black and white portrait of Václav Talich, a man with dark hair, looking directly at the camera. The image is split vertically by a yellow bar. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

václav talich: **a man can work** **under any circumstances**

Václav Talich is to Czech performance what Smetana or Dvořák is to Czech composing. He took the great tradition of Czech 19th-century music and gave it the shape that remains modern to this day. When we look at his activity in the Czech Philharmonic, the National Opera and elsewhere, we soon realise that he was perhaps the most hardworking of Czech musicians – and especially abroad he was often compared with the greatest conductors of his time. For that reason alone (although there are many others), he is a figure worth attention. The course and meaning of his life, however, far transcends the field of music, since his destiny, like that of all great artists, sets up a mirror to the age in which he lived, and also to the standards of today.

JINDŘICH BÁLEK, PETR KADLEC

APPRENTICESHIP YEARS

He was born on the 28th of May 1883 in Kroměříž, but from the age of two grew up in Klatovy. His was not the childhood of an infant prodigy and his memories of student bands, playing at dances or performing the Ryba's *Mass* – where he played the tympani – are slightly reminiscent of the times of F. L. Věk. At the Klatovy Grammar School he early developed a fascination with Latin and Greek literature and it was to remain his great literary love throughout his life. From 1896 he studied the violin at the Prague Conservatory and even joined the exclusive class of Professor Ševčík. The scholarship that he won on the personal recommendation of Antonín Dvořák allowed him to study without material worries. He could attend concerts, university lectures, keep up with Herben's *Čas* (Time journal) and passionately discuss new literature with his fellow students.

After graduating he spent a year as first violinist in the Berlin Philharmonic, but he was so impressed by its conductor, the legendary Artur Nikisch, that the twenty-one year-old Talich decided to become a conductor himself. As a result of tuberculosis, however, he soon had to leave Berlin, and go to Russia to regain his health. His experiences in Odessa, where in 1905 he lived through the famous docking of the Battleship *Potemkin*, and then in Tbilisi, were often adventures in life rather than art, but he was pleased at any opportunity to lay aside his violin and take up the conductor's baton. Talich got his first chance of a longer engagement in Ljubljana in 1908–1912. During these years he also married and managed to "slip over" to Leipzig, where he improved his knowledge of musical theory and composition under Max Reger.

There followed three years as a conductor in Pilsen and three years "unemployed" (1915–1918). At that time he devoted himself intensively to the ancient classics, but mainly to the study of scores, without even having any certainty that he would ever be able to conduct. In 1917 Josef Suk finished his symphonic poem *Zrání* (Ripening). Ludvík Vítězslav Čelanský and Karel Kovařovic, who had earlier conducted premieres of Asrael and *Pohádky léta* (Summer Fairytales) were both keen to conduct it, but Suk entrusted *Zrání* to his friend, a Pilsen conductor as yet unknown in Prague – Václav Talich. The premiere on the 30th of October 1918, a mere two days after the declaration of Czechoslovak independence, was a fundamental turning point in his career. After the new year he was appointed second conductor of the Czech Philharmonic and in September 1919 he became its chief conductor.

SWEAT AND GLORY

Heading the young orchestra initially meant a daily struggle to improve the material conditions of the musicians. There was neither a permanent organisational base nor much general awareness that Czech culture needed a permanent orchestra at all. For Talich,

however, material want was never grounds for reducing standards. The economic situation of the orchestra improved only slowly, but its musical level rose steeply. "I do not deny that the Czech musician has great natural talent, temperament and passion, but it was soon clear to me that he lacks discipline and respect for the note, for the rules," Talich later recalled, "That was why the first years of my activities at the Czech Philharmonic were years of preparation and training. The more and more difficult tasks of reproduction came only when I had created the instrument."

To the Philharmonic he brought not just artistic idealism and a new way of working, but also systematic and genuinely conceptual thinking on repertoire. In the very first years he introduced a cycle of Czech symphonies and symphonic poems, but also had the idea of evenings devoted to the music of individual European nations. When we remember that he studied all the pieces part by part from the score, the range of works presented seems almost incredible. The Philharmonic at this period played the greatest quantity of new and contemporary pieces and Talich liked to experiment in their interpretation.

It was not just a matter of discovering new works, but often of the first proper rehearsal and thorough interpretation of well-known works. For example in a letter of 1918 he wittily wrote on the subject of the presentation of *Slavonic Dances*: "I would like to show that Dvořák was a poet of rhythm and not at all just a musician writing dance music. If it was and remains possible to talk about Dvořák in these terms, the main fault lies with our brilliant reproductive art that has churned out *Slavonic Dances* time after time in the smoke-filled Vinohrady House over a beer and now believes that the mistake can be remedied by just transferring them to the Municipal House. The smoke and the beer linger on in them to this day!"

In 1924 the Czech Philharmonic under Talich's baton excelled at an international music festival in Prague, two years later Talich conducted Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and in the same year took the orchestra to Vienna "right into the lions' den" with Mahler's *9th Symphony*... and the success was overwhelming. Talich's international fame grew and he was invited to conduct all the important European orchestras – to Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and to Sweden. He welcomed the opportunity to see how he would cope in other places. These engagements culminated in his appointment as principal conductor of the Stockholm Orchestra in the years 1931–1933.

In Sweden his experiences were similar to those of Bedřich Smetana eighty years before: a country with an incomparably poorer musical tradition treated him with greater openness, interest, honour and above all gratitude than his native land. To this day Talich's name figures in the Swedish gallery of honour somewhere between Toscanini

and Furtwängler. After two seasons, however, he returned to the Czech Philharmonic and also finally began to teach at the Master School of the Prague Conservatory. From the start of his career, however, he had many inveterate enemies and almost every major step that he took was attacked. For excessive performance of Smetana, for too little respect for Smetana, for paying too little attention to contemporary composers, for presenting contemporary composers too often, for pedantry, but also for subjectivism etc. etc. He rarely bothered to defend himself and believed that the strongest argument was a well performed work. There was a storm of criticism when he was offered the post of chief of opera at the National Theatre following the death of Otakar Ostrčil. Talich was appointed to the post in 1935, but his duties meant that he did not take it up in practice until the Spring of 1936.

THE NATION FOR ITSELF

While with the Czech Philharmonic he had had to start from scratch, as head of the National Theatre opera company he could build on the work of two predecessors. He had Kovařovic's temperament and sense for fullness of sound, and the education and erudition of Otakar Ostrčil. To this he added a feeling for modern musical drama, perfectionism and a determination to create a performing tradition of Smetana, but also Dvořák, Janáček and Mozart. The first work that he presented, on the 19th of June 1936 was Dvořák's *Rusalka*. He then successively presented Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová*, *Her Step-Daughter*, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, but also *The Secret*, *The Devil's Wall* and others. He threw himself into the production of Mozart operas with new energy. The situation after the Munich Diktat in 1938, faced him with the question of whether he should stay at home and expose himself to the risks, or emigrate. There was no lack of countries that would have been glad to receive him, but he decided to stay. Thanks to Talich, the standard of the National Theatre during the war was the highest in its history. In addition, he founded the Prague Musical May Festival and up to 1941 was also principal conductor of the Czech Philharmonic. He was at the height of his powers and his intensive activity was based on his clear conviction that work and the highest standards were in themselves moral values: "Cultural matters have ceased to be the privilege of the initiated and ought to become the most important element of the expression of national will and pride." And he won colleagues over to his side both directly and indirectly: "Surrounded by a German sea we can demonstrate our right to life only by fanatical output and effectiveness, devote yourselves completely to our work – after all it is the only right that the system today has left us."

The Nazis naturally tried to get Talich on their side, but when they failed to get his agreement they managed without it. They "improved" his newspaper articles and inter-



views, and against his will they appointed him to the League against Bolshevism, fooling a large part of the population. Talich protested and tried to avoid further traps. For example he had an unnecessary hip operation as an excuse for not having to conduct at the Berlin Opera. When forced to take the Czech Philharmonic to Berlin, Talich made it a condition that the programme must contain Beethoven's *Egmont* and the whole of Smetana's *Má Vlast* (My Country), which in the Protectorate could only be performed without the Tábor and Blaník sections. In 1944 he vainly tried to save the National Theatre company from deportation for forced labour. After the closure of the National Theatre on the 1st of September 1944 he lived in his villa in the town of Beroun. There he once again studied the score of Smetana's *Libuše*, believing that it would be the first opera that he would put on at the National Opera after the war. Alas, he was never to conduct it again... as he feverishly worked on it during the war he had no inkling that the worst times were yet to come...

BETWEEN TWO PRECIPICES

After the liberation he was forbidden to rejoin the National Theatre. According to Talich's old enemy and the new Minister of Education, Zdeněk Nejedlý, the National Theatre should have been silent during the war, and not performed for Germans. In May 1945 Talich was arrested – or as it was reported "held" – and spent six dreadful weeks in the prison in Pankrác. The reason? Collaboration during the war. The charge was not sustainable in the long term, and so Talich was finally freed by a Czech court and explicitly cleared on all possible counts. The "Talich case" did not, however, disappear from the pages of the newspapers and harsh and unexpected blows continued to rain down on the conductor. In a letter of 1945 he wrote, "Truth and justice will of course prevail, but woe to those whom God has chosen to

prove that good cannot be suppressed. In these terrible six years our nation has experienced this on the large-scale in the last seven months I have experienced it on the small scale. Now I walk without confidence, battered, and I will need to meet many more good people before trust and zest for work are kindled in me again." He rediscovered both – one might say – thanks to the birth of the Czech Chamber Orchestra.

In the spring of 1946 a group of his pupils from the master school of the conservatory met and together with Ivan Medek, who subsequently took on most of the organisational work, founded a voluntary ensemble of young conservatory students. Talich was able to work with them at a time when he was prevented from appearing publicly. At the same time it was with them that Talich fulfilled his old dream of working with a smaller ensemble. At the first rehearsal in March 1946 it had 24 stringed instruments and it was gradually joined by others.

Following the first postwar elections in May of the same year, Dr. Jaroslav Stránský became the minister of education. Stránský was favourably inclined to Talich and proved the first to give him the opportunity to work with the National Theatre orchestra again. With this orchestra Talich rehearsed *My Country* for its first postwar performance, which took place on the 27th of September 1946 in the Smetana Hall. When he appeared on the podium the audience rose and paid him tribute.

Soon after, his first concert with the Czech Chamber Orchestra took place, with a programme of earlier Czech music. The young group caused a minor sensation and every subsequent performance just confirmed the initial enthusiasm. They also played with the famous French cellist Pierre Fournier, who said: "I will do everything possible to ensure that this exceptional ensemble comes to Paris to show the French how chamber music should be done... It is the most per-

fect ensemble I have ever heard and the most perfect in existence."

Talich so enjoyed his work with the CCO that he hesitated for a time over whether to accept the offer to return to the post of head of opera at the National Theatre. He preferred to work just with the young ensemble, where he could do things that were impossible with any other orchestra, and where he had developed a unique relationship with the young musicians. It was in 1947 that he returned to the National Theatre and began to revive earlier productions and prepare the premiere of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The psychological and work pressure unfortunately caused him to suffer a stroke at the end of the year and he spent several months recovering.

And then came the Communist take-over in February 1948, which turned insignificant hacks into weighty and powerful figures in cultural life. And the "cultural front" that they formed, headed by Zdeněk Nejedlý, was more accurately to be described as a liquidation brigade. The new ban on appearances by Talich and the end of the Czech Chamber orchestra are living proofs of the cultural barbarism of socialism.

THE DARK AGE

The new prohibition of his activities reopened the wounds that Talich had sustained as a prisoner in Pankrác, and he was never fully to recover from them. He courageously took the opportunity to rebuild the Slovak Philharmonic from scratch and for three years (1949–1952) commuted to Bratislava. Gradually he regained the chance at least to record with the Czech Philharmonic, and this means that today we still have a record of at least a fragment of Talich's extraordinary musical achievements.

Even in these reduced circumstances he was still a man who shone and was unfailingly generous with his talent. The Slovak Philharmonic proved at least as grateful as



the Stockholm orchestra, and the atmosphere during recordings with the Czech Philharmonic was sometimes nothing short of miraculous. "I tremendously enjoy working and a man can work in any circumstances. This fanaticism for work has got me through everything", said Talich in a short speech to the Philharmonic on his sixty-ninth birthday, "but I don't want to be regarded any longer as someone who has sinned against his nation even in the smallest way."

His first public appearance with the Czech Philharmonic, again with Smetana's *My Country*, was not to take place, however, until the 5th of March 1954. On that day Talich found the strength only to conduct the Vyšehrad movement. The rest of the concert, in a packed hall, was taken over by Karel Ančerl. Talich conducted the whole of *My Country* two months later at the opening concert of the Prague Spring. During the festival he appeared several times more, for example at a legendary concert with Sviatoslav Richter. His last public performance was a subscription concert with a programme of Mozart on the 19th of November 1954.

Thanks to family, friends and pupils he was able to experience some moments of a happy old age, but the overall picture of the tragic end of one of the greatest of Czech musicians is hard to contest, still less the guilt of those responsible. On the eve of his seventy-fourth birthday he was awarded the title of National Artist – a hypocritical gesture on the part of the regime and a debt paid too late. The book *Document of a Life and Work*, which is an excellent and still the best portrait of the artist, was written for the occasion. It could be published, however, only much later in 1967, six years after Václav Talich's death on the 16th of March 1961 in Beroun.

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the talich archive

BOHUSLAV VÍTEK

I hope that the Supraphon won't be annoyed at the "borrowing" of this title. Years ago it was the title of three albums, at that time still vinyl records, of re-editions of Václav Talich recordings. The first was devoted solely to recordings of Josef Suk, the second concentrated on Czech music, and the third on the world repertoire. In their time they were an extremely valuable and important series for getting to know the field. For many people it was also a first meeting with Talich's much older recordings from the 1920s and 30s, naturally not yet produced by Supraphon but by the London firm and later released under the Electrola and Victor labels. Supraphon is today the main hope that the recordings of the conductor Václav Talich will not fall into oblivion, since the archive contains all the recordings that Talich made at a time when recordings had started to reach an acceptable technical level, i.e. at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s.

The ability to technically modify recordings without fundamentally changing their identity, which came with the development of digitalisation and compact disks at the beginning of the 1980s, brought benefits few had anticipated. Those hard to find recordings from the pre-war period started to appear in great quantities in faultlessly cleaned up form and so today it is much easier to get an idea of the interpretations of the period. Major collections of Toscanini, Furtwängler

and other conductors came out. Recently the extensive EMI Great Conductors of the 20th Century series has earned special attention, and in it a double album of Talich, although for the most part containing more recent Supraphon recordings. These have in fact mostly already been published by Supraphon separately, especially in what is known as the "postal" edition for the 100th anniversary of the Czech Philharmonic. If, however, we are interested in the period when Talich was principal conductor of the orchestra, i.e. the First Republic and the Occupation, then we should certainly take note of the double album from the Tahrá company, which is the first to put the Dvořák Symphonies from the 1930s on compact disc, for example. Nor should we forget the very important production of the Koch Legacy company (RCD), which has had the courage to release the very first Talich recordings of *Má vlast* [My Country] (1929) and *Slavonic Dances* (1935). This introductory survey is meant to indicate that it is now very much high time that Václav Talich, like his great colleagues on the international scene, should finally be honoured with his own major and comprehensive anthology of recordings. It is no secret that Supraphon has such a project in mind. Let us hope that it will be as soon as possible and as complete as possible. An excellent and, it seems, exhaustive catalogue is available in the new English Talich discography produced by Graham Slater. Ladislav



Šíp's short article on recording with Václav Talich, later included into the almanach of memories and documents relating to Václav Talich compiled by Ivan Medek (Prague 1967), is also a very valuable document, although more a memoir.

Recently and with great fascination we have been listening again to the newly cleaned and released recordings of Karel Ančerl (Ančerl Gold series, Supraphon). It is also a way of reaching a deeper understanding of the Czech performance tradition – our former domain. It is through Talich recordings, however, that we shall get to what is fundamental, and the starting point for a whole generation. There were very few top Czech performers of the latter half of the twentieth century that were untouched by Talich's personality. The contact was not necessarily direct, but could be mediated by teachers and colleagues who had gone through the Talich school. Rafael Kubelík, Karel Ančerl, Charles Mackerras and other important conductors all emerged from the spirit of Talich, even if they later developed their own personal styles. And there is no need to limit our view to conductors. The world of instrumentalists affected by Talich's personality, who themselves have passed on their experience to entire generations of pupils, is still larger. Talich died in 1961 and those who remember him directly are gradually departing. Already what we can learn of the style of his work and his opinions as musician and man, always closely and directly inter-related, is necessarily second-hand, and this can lead to distortion. Hence recordings are actually the only reliable source of knowledge and understanding. None of them, however, offer us Talich's definitive view! As is well-known, he recorded with great ardour but never regarded the result as musically final, and this was true of the concert hall as well. His comment after completing his legendary recording of *My Country* in 1954 is telling: "So au revoir until my next recording of *My Country*!" For every new performance or recording he re-approached even the most famous works in detail, quite often presenting a markedly different interpretation. One good example is provided precisely by his recordings of the Smetana Cycle. Comparing the recordings of 1929 and 1954 we find that the differences are not only in the tem-

po (here, however, we need to take into account the fact that in 1929 recordings were made in five-minute sections corresponding to one side of a 78 black disk), but in overall conception. The earlier recording is full of a youthful spirit, a greater romantic tremulousness, while on the other hand we are rather taken aback by techniques that are entirely unacceptable today (for instance glissandi). The later recording of 1954 is more static, although this does not mean that it loses anything of its dynamic flow adorned by acoustically juicy climaxes. We can say much the same about the recordings of the Slavonic Dances. The 1935 version is ravishing in its tempo and energetic commitment, but less thorough in the working out of details. This is natural – there is no call for fussiness! In contrast, in 1950 Talich conceived the individual dances as small musical poems, rich in superb details. Dvořák's biographer Otakar Šourek is said to have annoyed him during the Dvořák recording of 1950 by pointing out that the individual dances were performed slower than in the previous recording.

For years it has been the conventional and very misleading view in this country that compared to younger conductors who try to interpret romanticism without too much agogics and in a more down-to-earth spirit, Talich was much more lyrical and tended to be slower in tempo. He has tended to be seen as more comparable to the conductors of what is known as the old school, i.e. more to the Klemperer or Böhm type than to a Toscanini or Karajan, for example. It is hard to discern the grounds for this distortion and mistake. It is enough to compare Talich's recordings of the Dvořák Serenade for Strings in E major, for example, with that of Karajan made thirty years later. Unusually, in 1951 Talich did not record the work (unlike Suk's *Serenade*) with the Czech Philharmonic, but with selected players from different Prague orchestras. Over many rehearsals he refined every detail with them, and strove for the richest possible scale of expression. The result was a superb dynamic recording – unusually dramatic in the faster sections and wistful, but by no means melancholic in the lyrical passages. This is unalloyed, vital Dvořák in all its characteristic features. Karajan – by the way a great admirer

of Talich – created the complete opposite in 1981 with the Berlin Philharmonic, and his version is closer to the world of Tchaikovsky or the Northern composers. We can find similar examples in recordings of Dvořák symphonies, but also in other works as well. There is no space here for deeper analysis of Talich's interpretation of Dvořák, which remains a great inspiration to this day, but let us at least mention the pre-war London recordings of the 6th and 7th symphonies, the double recordings of the 8th and 9th symphonies, the legendary recording of the Dvořák *Cello Concerto* with Rostropovich, the *Piano Concerto* with Maxián and the *Stabat Mater* with outstanding soloists. It is also crucial in this context to remember the Dvořák recording, which represents a kind of Talichian synthesis. This is a recording of the symphonic poems based on Erben's *Kytice* (Bouquet: a famous Czech poem cycle). We can only regret that Talich – also an outstanding opera conductor – did not make a complete recording of any opera, since in Dvořák's poems, which are often criticised for a certain formal incongruity, he showed that the composer was as great a dramatist as he was an architect. He engaged systematically with these works, although he never presented them in complete form at a concert, and demonstrated (let us concede that it was after certain retouches for example in the *Golden Spinning-Wheel*, but in accordance with the written instructions of the composer!) that it was possible to combine the two elements in a form of genius. To achieve this, however, requires a great deal of labour and work with every detail. Although there exists a whole series of recordings of these poems, apart from Talich probably only Zdeněk Chalabala managed the feat. Unfortunately this major Talich recording suffers from having been made just at the point of transition to recording on tape. The symphonic poem *The Water Goblin* was using the earlier technology and digitalisation had to be carried out from old 78 discs. The radio recording of the symphonic poems as performed (without the *Golden Spinning-Wheel*) at a concert in 1954 may be regarded as at least a partially technically superior "substitute". The studio recordings of the *Noonday Witch*, *Golden Spinning-Wheel* and especially the *Dove* (we would be hard put to it to find a more convincing version of the exultant and emotionally thrilling central part) are, however, an entirely faithful picture of the philharmonic sound of the time.

From Dvořák it is but a short step to Suk, at the beginning of his career the heir of Dvořák but later, with his ambitiously conceived and difficult scores the first Czech modernist. Here the recordings of the *Asrael* Symphony and the long musical poem *Ripening* (Zrání) rank alongside the legendary recording of the *Serenade in E Flat major* and the technically handicapped *Fairytales* (see comments on the *Water Goblin* above) as among the best and most valuable

elements in the Talich archive. Alas, he did not record the *Epilogues* and the *Fairytale of Summer* (although the latter was recorded in peerless fashion with the Philharmonic at the same time by his colleague of many years Karel Šejna). The recording of the *Asrael* is a showcase example of a gigantic score, conceived and elaborated into a single over-arching whole in modern spirit. The same can be said of *Ripening*. Václav Talich was near the end of his musical career when he prepared this work for recording. He insisted on an unheard of number of rehearsals, in which he polished every detail. Although they tried their best to meet the demands of the forever unsatisfied Talich, the musicians of the Philharmonic became very tired. When Talich finally demanded that they rehearse the whole thing one more time, they secretly asked the sound master František Burda to push the button on the tape recorder. Their performance during the "run-through" then persuaded the very surprised and pleased conductor to accept the "secret" recording as definitive. Talich's pupil Zdeněk Bílek later added a few retouches and additional passages with the concluding women's choir. The fact that it is a recording of a single long passage without interruption makes it a historical document as well as a musical achievement. It gives us a chance to savour Suk's *Ripening* in all its unity and integrity, which cannot be said of other recordings of the work.

The works of Leoš Janáček have a rather curious status in Talich's recording output. He was a composer whom Talich particularly loved and in whom he had a deep interest confirmed by several interpretations of his operas in the National Theatre. Talich explored them in their full depth and the performance of Janáček's works undoubtedly contributed to his fame. It is just a pity that only two recordings were made, and they do not offer an ideal picture, since Talich's many retouches, however well meant, provoke some embarrassment. The score of *Taras Bulba* was at many points romanticised and time has ultimately proved the greater truthfulness of Janáček's original version as presented on recordings by Bakala and later Ančerl. Nor can we today accept the suite from *The Cunning Little Vixen* without reservations, and we cannot help feeling that František Jílek's version is more authentic than that of Václav Talich (or Jaroslav Řídký and František Škvor). *The Cunning Little Vixen* was one of Talich's great loves. One can only speculate how a complete recording under his baton would have sounded in the pure original...

The Czech masters are indebted to Talich for a series of other brilliant recordings, which remain in many respects models to this day. Let us mention at least one that is easy to overlook, Smetana's *Prague Carnival*. Unlike the overwhelming majority of conductors, who seem helpless in the face of this peculiar orchestral fragment, Talich demonstrated in a masterly and fully thought out interpretation that it was an extraordinary work, which



at some points even marks out future potential directions in the development of music as a whole. Another recording that is almost forgotten is Talich's fresh and joyful interpretation of Smetana's cantata *Czech Song* with what was still just Jan Kühn's Czech Choir, since it has not been released in recent decades.

Foreign composers are in distinct minority as compared to the Czech masters in Talich's catalogue. It might therefore seem that Talich's domain was simply that of Czech music. This is, however, a mistakenly simple view and one that is tellingly challenged by Talich's recording of one evergreen in world concert halls, Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*, "*Pathétique*". There are few other recordings on which we can hear so dramatic and humanly painful a rendering of the first movement with its spellbinding sense of struggle, as is confirmed by the admiration it aroused in the grand old man of the Russian school of conducting, Talich's younger colleague and friend Yevgeny Mravinsky, whose equally famous recording of the work does not in my opinion compare with Talich's. Talich's Mozart is also remarkable – completely balanced in terms of expression, and often emotionally more compelling than the Mozart we are used to today (*Clarinet Concerto* with V. Říha). With the passage of time we naturally have more serious reservations about the recordings of the Baroque (Bach's *Concerto in D minor* with S. Richtř, Händel's *Oboe Concerto in G Minor* with F. Hanták or Bach's *Suite in D major* with the Slovak Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble), just as with similar recordings by other composers in later years (Klemperer, Karajan). These have value more as documents of how

the Baroque was played until relatively recently, i.e. in the spirit of the romantic tradition.

Talich's individuality shines from all the recordings and there is no alternative but to regret, once again, that a conductor so important in both the Czech and international musical life of the twentieth century did not have a chance to make more. Analysis of the whole Talich archive, of each recording, today still in many respects so up-to-date, would require a whole book. Such a book would be exceedingly useful. It would undoubtedly highlight the legacy of Talich mentioned at the beginning of this article. One example may stand for many: the idea behind Talich's efforts in the short history of the Czech Chamber Orchestra that he founded was taken up later by his younger colleague, the violinist, chamber musician and teacher Josef Vlach when he founded a new Czech Chamber Orchestra. Nor did this idea die with the distinguished Vlach. The Czech Chamber Orchestra – now the third generation – lives on under the musical direction of Vlach's pupil Ondřej Kukal and Vlach's daughter Jana. Once again we have a proof in the form of a recording – Suk's *String Serenades*! Talich made it with the Czech Philharmonic, but Vlach and then Kukal have made the same recording with the Czech Chamber Orchestra. Each of these recordings is completely individual, but in each we sense the background that they have in common! Like a silver thread, the tradition that started with Talich now winds on in the fabric of our contemporary musical life.

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the electronic worlds of michal rataj

At Czech Radio, where you work, you initiated the intermedia project rAdioCUSTICA, which includes not only the brilliantly operated Internet portal <http://www.rozhlas.cz/radiocustica>, but also the programme Radioateliér, broadcast by Čro 3 – Vltava. Can you explain the impulses that led to this project? What inspired you to it? And what exactly is rAdioCUSTICA trying to achieve?

Let me just clear up the nomenclature. Every week from Friday to Saturday Vltava broadcasts the programme Radioateliér as an experimental slot for new radio compositions. As a producer, every month I'm given what is known as a PremEdice (Prime Edition) of Radioateliér designed exclusively for premieres of pieces by Czech composers (mainly the younger) who have created new projects specially for this slot. My aspiration – and I admit it's not exactly humble – is to create something through this longer-term

production work that might in the future be called a Czech ars acustica scene – with crossovers into visual art, the web, multimedia and so on. rAdioCUSTICA is the virtual extension of Radioateliér in the form of a database on the broadcast projects, photos, references, and there's also a sound archive there and links to other servers in the world, the spark for a kind of theoretical cell of ars acustica... My vision of the portal is great, but time is limited...

Was it hard to get the project through at Czech Radio?

If you get the support of the bosses for a certain vision, then it's not a problem – and I think that's what happened in this case and it's still happening and I'm really pleased about it. The real problem to fulfil the vision in the long-term – and here I underline the work “long-term”, because in our conditions we're talking about a very long haul indeed. But I have the feeling that even just these first ten entirely new productions, specially

created for the radio, represent a certain signal... and so we shall have to wait and see how the signal strengthens after 2 years...

What sort of response has rAdioCUSTICA had so far?

To be honest I expected a bigger response, but then again I'm a realist. It's partly that it is a very new thing and quite sophisticated, and doesn't have a very long tradition in this country. And then, and here I have to admit a bit of mea culpa – when I get the chance to devote myself just to this area, then the information quality of the portal and so the feedback too will definitely be greater, and perhaps discussion in the form will finally take off, and perhaps we shall get closer to portals of the audiohyperspace type (www.swr2.de/audiohyperspace).

One element of rAdioCUSTICA is the project “Compositor”, which is a kind of appeal for universal radiophonic creativity. Can you explain what pre-



Michal Rataj (1975) is not only a composer, but also a musicologist and a radio producer. When he talks about music it is clear that he doesn't just create it but also reads a great deal about it and thinks about it on a theoretical level. He is realising his vision of how contemporary music should be presented in the civic association S.H.O.C.K. (Soudobá hudba otevřená celé kultuře – Contemporary Music Open to the Whole Culture), and on Czech Radio, in "his" Prime Edition Radioateliér (Radio studio) he is creating a space for the radiophonic output of his contemporaries. In fact "radiophony" and "ars acustica", and electro-acoustic music in general is also Rataj's main interest in composition.

cisely this is all about? How many contributions have you received so far?

Anyone can download in mp3 several dozen sounds, effects, musical extracts and so on, and use them to create his or her own short piece, sound story. I haven't received many pieces, but those I have received are amazingly charming. I haven't closed the "competition", and I'm letting it run on although after a while I shall change the individual sounds and every so often I shall broadcast the best entries on the PremEdice of Radioateliér.

PremEdice also involves both names from the "academic" music scene (Miroslav Srnka, Slavomír Hoříňka, Tomáš Pálka and others), and groups that have come to electronic music and "ars acustica" from a rather different direction (e.g. Auvid and e.o). What in your view is the difference between the academic and non-academic electronic scene? In your programme you seem to be trying to bring them together – why?

For me as a composer and musicologist this is an exceedingly interesting experience – the confrontation between two worlds that both have a chance to gain something from the other. Very briefly: academic composers are often a little biased as far as the more abstract acoustic qualities are concerned, they think more in notes and musical structures. Non-academics (often visual artists) do the precise opposite, but then again they often have a problem with the perception of time and the formation of the acoustic material within time, which can damage the whole. I think that the confrontation of these two worlds is extremely necessary and valuable, and in this country pretty crucial for the future development of the soundart scene...

But let's not talk only about rAdioCUSTICa and radiophony. What attracts you to electronic music in general? What do you see as its main potential? What type of electronic

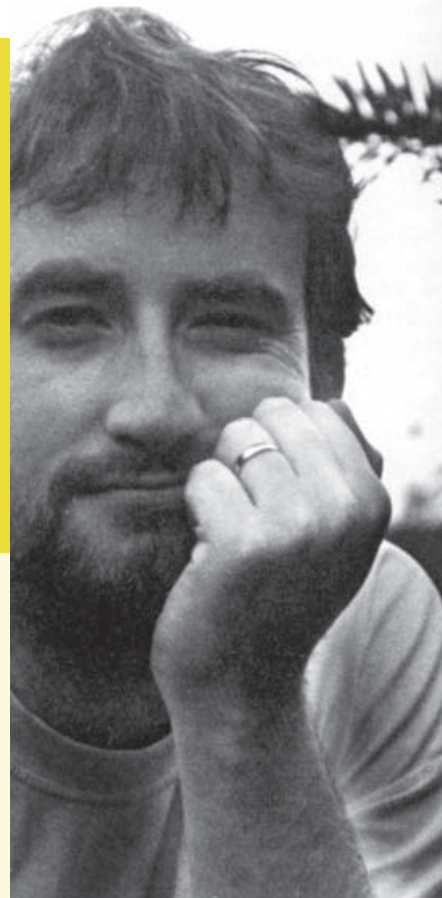
work with sound is the most interesting for you?

At the most general level probably the most interesting type of work is when every new composition gives me the chance to create a kind of virtual world, which is completely different from the world of acoustic instruments, the chance to experiment with building such a world from the first "bricks", the first played sound (acoustic and electronic). On the other hand, electronics for me isn't "something other" than the world of acoustic instruments, and what actually interests me more is to link up the two worlds, to try and transfer instrumental diction into electronics and vice versa, to find the rhythm of acoustic sound and transfer it into electronic contexts. That is maybe why I'm not as technically precise as other composers in my work with electronic material; I don't mind leaving the sound with a slight hum or buzz, and so it isn't crystal pure, but I always try to ensure that it breathes, and has some life of its own – that it shouldn't be a piece of cold electronic stone.

Apart from that – I've been keen on cables and potentiometers and data-wheels every since I was small, and I made my first synthetic art out of lego...

One feature of your music that I find interesting is that on the one hand you exploit the most recent technology of work with sound, but at the same time you rely on certain aesthetic and intellectual principles that could be called "traditional". Your pieces usually have a carefully constructed and closed form, and sometimes tend towards the monumental (see the *Vítkov Oratorio*), and they typically have an intellectual seriousness, and an aspiration to spiritual and timeless communication. It is as if you were untouched by the widespread post-modern relativism...

The worst thing is when a composer (especially one that has studied musicology) has to talk about his own pieces... Maybe there



is something in what you say. Form is generally quite important to me and maybe you could say that I'm actually very conservative as far as form is concerned. The thing is that I feel there are certain principles whereby music functions in time and that these are unchanging over the centuries. And to be honest in this respect I have no ambitions to invent anything new, since I am sure that I would get nowhere.

On the other hand, what interests me a great deal are sharp conflicts between the themes and material that I use in the pieces. I remember how many of my teachers at the Academy of Performing Arts were shocked when I wrote a chorale with a simple three-chord harmony. It was (almost) light pop, but I liked it a lot, and what was interesting was that nobody considered why I had done it like that. Or else in my electronic piece *Oratorium electronicum* I took the word "krleš" (Kyrie eleison in old Czech) and derived the word "lež" (lie) from it by vowel similarity, and let the two words sound in parallel. That's what I hugely enjoy – taking building blocks that are very different (musically, rhythmically, semantically) and bringing them into absolute contrast and letting them resonate. I don't want to say much about musical meanings, but if this kind of approach can be regarded as a certain type of meaning, then I can say that I really try to get it into my music and I am pleased that the meanings resonate in a different way for each listener and that – if you will – "post-modern meta-meanings" develop out of it.

You are currently president of the civic association SHOCK (www.ishock.org), which apart from openness towards new technologies also proclaims the aim of linking up contemporary music with art and architecture. On its web pages we find the statement, "Interpenetrating with the visual arts, contemporary music can open up a new artistic space." This suggests something more than just the more attractive presentation of contemporary music with the aim of gaining a larger audience. Could you tell us a bit more about this concept?

It's simple. Traditional concert performance, which developed during the 17th century, survives today in a form that in no way corresponds to the music being written today; we are applying means of presentation that are three centuries old to the music of the present. It is absurd, but that's the way it is, and I think that in this respect music is incontestably the most conservative of all the arts. SHOCK is trying to show that music produced in the present day must exist in its natural contexts (visual, productive, social). This is why it tries for more communication with artists in other fields, seeking to enrich music with a visual dimension (suitably chosen space, light design etc.) and bring it to places with which it will resonate naturally for the modern listener (i.e. somewhere other than a Baroque hall with crystal chandeliers). I think that the experience of several projects we have organised has confirmed our ideas (the most recent was "Deconstructions" at the Vítkov Monument). Contemporary music is not (or does not necessarily have to be) for a specialised public. If there are emotions in that music, then the emotions can resonate in any person who allows them to resonate. It is just necessary to create the space for the resonance, and to create it in a way adequate to the age in which we live.

What role has "bigbeat" played in your life as a musician?

A big role. And not just big beat, but jazz, ethno, country... I've never found it a problem switching over in my brain from Messiaen to Sting, and then Chick Corea and Bill Evans, and to get from Redl right over to Värttinä, for example. Maybe in time it will develop into some musical multischizophrenia, but my feeling is that if you live music to the full, then it has to be genuine and so it has to be safe. Just as it is when every so often I have a terrific need to take my "clapperboards" to some smoky club and just play blues, or three-chord bigbeat...

You will find Michal Rataj's personal pages at: www.volny.cz/compositor/

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MATĚJ KRATOCHVÍL

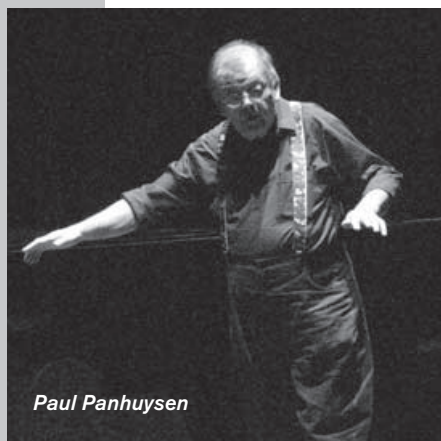


The "newness" of the music is a problematic criterion. The festival's title may give some people the impression that it is a festival of world premieres, which it is not. Nor is it a showcase of new trends. It tries to offer new things in the sense of relatively new things, but also things not yet heard in our part of the world. Even after fourteen years there are still plenty of them. And of course, given that one person is responsible for most of the preparations, it is no wonder that the occasional hitch occurs (although this is no real excuse).

The festival programme is always a compromise between what the organisers want, what the performers offer and what the sponsors will pay for. There are always items that are potentially contentious. As an example we can take the opening concert, the Czech premiere of Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, which was the main draw of the festival and, thanks to the posters, gave it its face. If the piece had been included in the Prague Spring, then the choice would undoubtedly have deserved praise from the critics. In the framework of the Marathon it seems more like "old music", but nonetheless music that has had an important influence on the contemporary form of music. Nor is it irrelevant that Arvo Pärt was a name that attracted a large audience.

In the field of sound installations and experiments, Paul Panhuysen is also a long-established veteran. His *The Long String* Installation brought nothing more than what the title promised: four strings strung across the podium and sounded by the author by hand, walking from side to side. This kind of music has been heard from many composers since the sixties (and of course Panhuysen has a major place among them). The view of a man in braces and trousers walking between the strings as if in a blind alley may have provoked sympathy, led to thoughts on the situation of experimental music, or just bored members of the audience, but it didn't lack a certain magic quality.

Following its premiere last year, there was a repeat of a block by Čestí mladoši (Czech Young Guys), i.e. a presentation of the promising among the new faces. Of the four composers presented, the one who clearly stood out was Michal Nejtek, who has already quite



Paul Panhuysen



Bernhard Lang



Smith Quartet



successfully established his reputation in this country and abroad and for whom the title "young guy" no longer seems quite appropriate. His piece *Different Colours* (*Made of Tears*) had a rock undertow (how otherwise given the inspiration chosen?) and he "stole" the model, the song *Venus in Furs* from the Velvet Underground, in an unobtrusive and ingenious way. With its melancholic mood *Vyzvání k tanci* [Invitation to the Dance] by Marko Ivanovič formed a good opposite pole. The pieces by Roman Pallas and Slavomír Hoříňka were still too "studenty" to say much about the personalities of the composers.

The Sunday concert was cancelled and so Praguers will have to wait a little longer for the operas (reportedly very interesting) by Martin Burtas and Lubomír Burgr. The traditional "Marathon" block once again demonstrated that Minimalism and the movements it has inspired have a strong

public following. The British Smith Quartet performed older pieces by Philip Glass and John Adams, together with stylistically different compositions by Kevin Volans and Steve Martland. This year Steffen Schleiermacher, who the year before last reaped success with early Philip Glass, presented early Terry Riley. He offered the European premiere of the only recently discovered *String Quartet 1960*, a remarkable example of the way Riley was initially influenced by La Monte Young. The second piece, *Tread on a Trail*, was perhaps excessively academic in comparison to the other recordings. The Minimalist and post-Minimalist set was completed by David Lang and his *Child*.

If one of the major recent trends is improvisation with electronics, i.e. hums, buzzes and rattles produced from a laptop, then the appearance of the LaLeLoo group is a libation to the absolutely contemporary. Here the composer Bernhard Lang presented his oth-

er face (the first is turned towards orchestral music) and with two fellow musicians offered a block of short pieces made out of noise strings and accompanied by video. The two elements of the performance had their interesting point, but both would have benefited from being less ground up and fragmented. The inclusion of a tape of piano pieces by Erik Satie, once again played by Schleiermacher, was a really big step back in time, but their monotony and dynamic uniformity were actually a pleasant change in the context of the rest of the programme.

If times changed and more people were able to take a hand in the preparation of the Marathon – in terms of programme and technically – it would perhaps be an improvement. Even in present circumstances, however, without the festival there would be a painful gap in the concert calendar.



Vítězslava Kaprálová: Songs

SUPRAPHON

Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940) was, despite her short life, prolific and original composer. It is not much known about her work and also not much was released yet. Supraphon is now filling one of the gaps. Kaprálová once wrote to her friend Jarmila Vavrdová: "... I would like to write just songs, they are my biggest love." Indeed, songs form an important part of her creative output. This new CD, released by Supraphon, presents almost all of them. We will not find here only two early pieces from 1930s, which were probably merely exercises for next work. Omitted are also *Hymn of the volunteer nurses of the Czechoslovak Red Cross* (1938), *Song of the workers of the Lord* (1939) and *In the Bohemian Land* (1939). Vítězslava Kaprálová had an affinity for poetry, which she also wrote herself. Her most favorite poet was Jaroslav Seifert (winner of the Nobel Prize in 1984), whose poems she used in the cycle *An Apple from the Lap*, Op. 10 (1934–1936) and in the first song of the cycle *Seconds*, Op. 18 (1936–1939). Among other poets we find Bohdan Jelínek, Vítězslav Nezval, Fráňa Šrámek or Viktor Kripner. She also used Czech and Moravian folk poetry, e. g. in *Carol* (1937) or *Love Song* (1939). Since the early *Two Songs* (1932) we can hear distinctive features of Kaprálová's style. It is mastery in setting the natural inflection of Czech speech while creating beautiful melodic lines. Next, she is also able to cre-

ate a strong feeling of "atmosphere" in accompaniment, which follows the mood of the text.

In the song *January* (1933), piano is joined by two violins, violoncello and flute. With this instrumentation, Kaprálová creates melancholic atmosphere for surrealistic text by Vítězslav Nezval.

Both performers serve the music very well. Dana Burešová is since 1991 a leading soloist at the National Theatre in Prague, with many great roles in her repertoire. Despite the highly demanding writing, she sings with admirable freshness, clarity and intelligent engagement with words. Her experience with the group Musica Antiqua helps her not to become exaggeratedly romantic in expression. Timothy Cheek does very much in promoting Czech music to the world. He wrote books *Singing in Czech* and *Janáček Opera Libretti* and is currently preparing a complete edition of Kaprálová's songs. In *January*, they are joined by members of Herold Quartet and flutist Magda Čáslavová.

Superbly presented 7 page booklet, with commentary by Timothy Cheek (in Czech, English, French and German), brings many important and interesting facts about songs and makes the impression of this great release complete.

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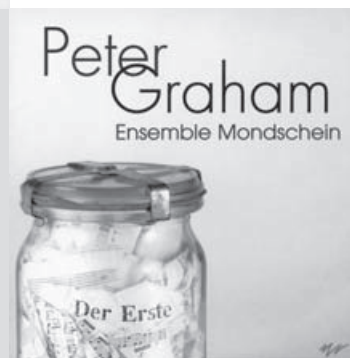
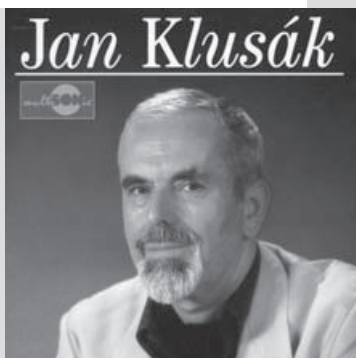
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